

ICPS newsletter

State secretaries are indispensable to a professional civil service

The International Centre for Policy Studies, in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers and the World Bank, are preparing a seminar on the issue of establishing the institution of state secretaries in Ukraine. Last week, as part of the seminar preparation, ICPS organised a meeting with Mary Collins, former minister of the Canadian government, and Steward Goodings, a former deputy minister—i.e., state secretary—at the ministry. They gave a presentation on mechanisms for the functioning of the civil service system in Canada, and shared their own experience regarding the professional relations between ministers and state secretaries. We offer below a summary of their presentations

Clear distinction of political and administrative functions

According to Ms. Collins, the way the system of public governance is developed and organised in Canada—following the British system to a great extent—effectively ensures the upholding of democratic principles. In the Canadian system, the Prime Minister selects ministers from among the elected members of parliament. Once someone becomes a minister, he/she has clear accountability both to the parliament and the public-at-large for the development of policies and strategic decisions at his/her ministry. Mr. Goodings added that the key to the success of the Canadian system was a clear distinction between the functions and responsibilities of ministers, who are elected politicians, and senior civil servants, who are hired employees.

In Canada, ministers are responsible for the oversight of government activities taking place within their ministries, but not for day-to-day administration and management. The minister's job is to maintain and guide a vision of the development of the relevant field, and to make policy decisions. They rely on their deputy ministers or ministry state secretaries as the most senior civil

servants to manage the operations of other civil servants within the ministry. Ms. Collins noted that, drawing an analogy with the private sector, the minister is like the chairman of the board at a corporation, while the deputy minister fulfils the functions of CEO or GM.

State secretary is the only employee reporting to the minister

Deputy ministers (i.e., state secretaries) play the role of executive managers; they are the most senior civil servants within the ministries, and the only employees to report directly to the ministers. State secretaries are responsible for the administration and delivery of services of their agencies to the public. Moreover, they are responsible for the human resources of the ministries, to make sure that the civil servants are competent and do their job properly.

The main role of professional civil servants, and particularly state secretaries, is to provide objective public policy analysis, including the unbiased examination of all possible options. No matter what political party the ministers come from, they have a clear mandate to choose among

presented options and make strategic decisions.

"I must say that during my period as minister over 5 years, I served in different departments with different deputy ministers and they all provided me with excellent service and advice", Ms. Collins said.

"As a civil servant, I always respected the right and the duty of the ministers to make the big decisions. And it was my duty as a civil servant to present the best possible professional advice and policy analysis to them, and then to carry out the decisions that they made", Mr. Goodings noted.

Relations between ministers and ministry state secretaries

When speaking on how functions and responsibilities are allocated between the ministers and state secretaries in Canada, Ms. Collins highlighted the following features of this process. When ministers determine that something should be done within a new policy, deputy ministers will provide policy analysis and describe what the implications could be, what the costs and benefits could be, and what the possible options and their impact on various civic groups could be. For example, state secretary might say that a given policy option could have a bad effect on a particular group of people and that it is not a good idea. Then, if the policymaker, i.e., minister, says, "No, sorry, it is something I'm going to do", he/she should take the responsibility.

Mr. Goodings noted that there is a risk of the politicisation of the state secretary position and of the civil service as a whole. If a minister has a

deputy minister who is known to have the same political views as the minister, then two negative things could happen. First of all, the minister does not get the best unbiased professional advice. The second danger is that the public loses confidence in public officials, because they believe that the civil service is simply going along with the political views of that particular minister.

According to Mr. Goodings, there were some instances in Canada when the government had politicised the senior levels of the civil service, and that was criticized very strongly by the public. Public official politicisation is contrary to the traditions of a professional civil service.

Ms. Collins stated how it is important that ministers receive a full and comprehensive analysis before making well-grounded decisions. It is the worst thing that could happen when ministers make wrong decisions due to the lack of information about their possible negative effects.

In the Canadian political system, the most powerful political figure is the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is an elected politician who can appoint whomever he/she wishes to the ministerial positions. The Prime Minister is also responsible for appointing the state secretaries. For example, if ministers are not satisfied with the productivity of deputy ministers, they can report on this to the Government Secretary or the Prime Minister, who then makes a decision on dismissing deputy ministers.

Another feature of the Canadian system of civil service is that in most cases, public officials work their way up the career ladder with emphasis on their professional and personal development rather than thanks to someone's friendly or family relations. That is why state secretaries operate in an environment where they can objectively reflect the real situation in their analysis, without any fear or doubt.

President determines functions of state secretaries

On 14 July 2001 the President of Ukraine issued a decree approving the standard regulations on ministry state secretaries, the Interfax-Ukraine News Agency reported. According to this document, the ministry state secretary is a public official who is responsible for supporting the minister's activities and organising the fulfilment of ministry mandates. State secretaries are accountable and subordinated directly to the ministers.

The regulations restrict the functions of the state secretary to ensuring the implementation of tasks which are in the area of the ministry's activity, as well as the activities of the minister as manager of the ministry and as a member of the Cabinet of Ministers. State secretaries should also organise the day-to-day operations directed at carrying out assignments delegated to the ministry and at ensuring the stability and continuity in ministry performance.

According to their role, state secretaries organise the activities of the Cabinet of Ministers apparatus, draft plans and programs of ministry operations, exercise control over their implementation, report on the results to the ministers, etc. Moreover, state secretaries should organise and monitor the execution of laws, acts, and directives issued by the President or the Cabinet of Ministers, as well as the orders and directives of the minister.

The document states that only the President of Ukraine is empowered to appoint (upon submission by the Prime Minister) and dismiss the state secretaries. The same procedure is defined regarding the first deputies and deputies of the state secretaries.

Relevant ministers submit proposals regarding persons to hold the office of state secretaries to the Prime Minister. Subject to the approval of the minister, the state secretaries propose candidates for the positions of their first deputy and other deputies to the Prime Minister.

The President appoints state secretaries and their first deputies and deputies for the term of his/her incumbency.

Individuals who permanently reside in Ukraine and are Ukrainian citizens, who have a higher education and five or more years of managerial experience, and who respond to other requirements set forth by legislation are eligible to be government secretaries.

State secretaries should be instituted in Ukraine without delay

Both Canadian experts emphasised that a functioning institution of state secretaries is the main determinant of the effective operation of the public governance system. Moreover, as Mr. Goodings noted, it is needed to have an effective system for training civil servants, as well as a clearly determined system of their subordination and accountability.

Ms. Collins believed that sound codes of ethical conduct should be introduced for civil servants, including a code of

behaviour in the realm of conflict of interest. There must be public confidence that state secretaries or ministers would never using their position to benefit themselves financially. Ms. Collins suggested as well that it really helps if there is to the greatest extent possible transparency around the government decision-making process, so the public understands how decisions are made within the government. ■

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ICPS Newsletter is a weekly publication of the International Centre for Policy Studies delivered by electronic mail. To be included in the distribution list mail to: marketing@icps.kiev.ua.

ICPS Newsletter is published by the ICPS Publications Group. ICPS Publications director Hlib Vyshlinsky (hlib@icps.kiev.ua) *ICPS Newsletter* editor Maria Melnyk (mmelnyk@icps.kiev.ua) English text editor D. (Ksenia) Ovcharenko. Articles may be reprinted with ICPS consent.

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